



STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE  
Department of Genetics

October 22, 1969

Dr. Philip Handler, President  
National Academy of Sciences

Executive Committee of the Council  
National Academy of Sciences

Gentlemen:

I am writing to you as a member of the Academy.

As is absolutely appropriate and necessary, the Academy is coming closer and closer to controversial questions where not only social and political decisions, but important economic interests are at stake. The recent cyclamate flap is one very obvious example.

I have had dreams of waking up some morning to read some yellow journalism attacking the integrity of the Academy's position on some contrived grounds of conflict of interest.

Perhaps the Academy has already established some formal procedures that would be helpful in defending itself from these kinds of allegations, and if so, my letter may be of very little point. I would like to stress that affiliations that are inherently quite innocent can easily be distorted way out of proportion to their actual significance as it appears to the individual in question before a great deal of hostile publicity has eventuated. Afterwards it may end up being very hard not only to deny aggressive allegations of improper conduct, but even to be entirely sure that one's judgments have been totally disconnected from questions of financial interest or close personal affiliation when the stakes are, as they often can be, rather high.

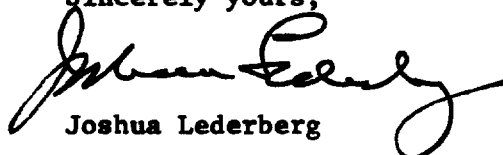
In any event, it seems to me important that at a minimum the Academy establish procedures for its advisory committees that match those of the federal Executive Branch (and do not in any way resemble the practice of the Legislative!). I realize that it may be a tiresome burden for members of such committees to make reports of their financial interests to the chairman, and that some additional apparatus of a rather distasteful kind may have to be established to deal with these issues. But believe me, it will be much more unpleasant if the Academy waits until there is a fabricated or real scandal.

As a member of the Academy I am sometimes faintly perturbed that my organization's name is invoked, and therefore indirectly my own personal reputation, behind reports of specialist committees whose conclusions are not directly responsive to the judgments of the Academy's own membership. This is, of course, a reality of life that must be respected if the Academy is to exercise any useful goal at all. However, this indirect commitment of the personal reputations of Academy members must be recognized as one additional very important reason to be sure that the procedures by which the studies are carried out insure the integrity of the trust that is implied by this relationship.

I do not believe it necessary to spell out in any detail the kinds of disclosures and self-disqualifications that a rigorous adherence to these concerns for dispelling conflict of interest must imply. There is substantial merit in conforming to the existing procedures of the Executive Branch, and I am sure these must be familiar to all of you.

I hope you will respond by telling me that my concerns are quite misplaced and that the Academy already has an effective program along these lines of which I am unaware. If not, the path to action should be quite clear.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Joshua Lederberg", with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Joshua Lederberg